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Order for Soviet U.N. Staff Cut Long Planned, U.S. Says

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan Administration's order to cut more than one-third of the Soviet presence at the United Nations was made as part of a broad anti-espionage program that has been in the works for months, despite some concern that it might reverse the warming trend in Washington-Moscow relations, U.S. officials said Monday.

The action, announced Friday, was taken at a sensitive time because of diplomatic jockeying over the date for the next summit meeting between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. But officials said there seemed to be no better time in the foreseeable future to take such a step.

One State Department official said the decision already had been postponed to avoid embarrassing Gorbachev during the just-completed Communist Party Congress. To have delayed further, until after a date for the summit had been set, would have meant making the move even closer to the start of the summit, possibly at an even more sensitive time, officials said.

"We've been working on it for a long time," a senior White House official said. Ideally, "it would have been nice if we'd done it in 1981 or 1982," he said, when U.S.-Soviet relations were at such a low point that such a move would not have significantly worsened them.

Nevertheless, Administration officials, joined by non-government specialists, said the move against the Soviet U.N. missions would not cause Moscow to torpedo the summit unless it wanted to do so anyway. Besides the Soviet Union, the Soviet republics of Byelorussia and the Ukraine each technically have their own U.N. missions.

"If Gorbachev wants to hold a summit, he will be there," said George Carver, a former deputy director of the CIA who is now on the staff of Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "If Gorbachev, for whatever reason, doesn't want to hold the summit, he will grab anything that is handy to call it off."

Reagan and Gorbachev agreed during their Geneva summit last November to meet again this year in the United States and next year in the Soviet Union. Washington wants the summit to take place in June or July but the Soviets favor a later date, probably September.

Gorbachev has hinted twice that he will not set a date for the next summit until some progress is made at the Geneva nuclear arms control talks. But both times, he seemed to back away by insisting that he was still committed to a 1986 meeting.

A former CIA official, who declined to be identified by name, said that the U.S. action might strengthen the hand of anti-U.S. hard-liners in the Kremlin, but he added that the Administration had little choice because of the long record of espionage activities by the Soviet missions.

Two senior Administration officials said the decision was the result of steady spying by Soviets at the United Nations rather than any single recent act. They pointed to information from defectors like (former Soviet U.N. official) Arkady N. Shevchenko that 40% to 60% of the Soviet personnel are professional intelligence agents.

Dmitri Simes, a Soviet emigre on the staff of the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace, said that the decision is justified because of Soviet espionage activity but that it is inconsistent with the agreement, signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in Geneva, to permit the Soviets to reopen a consulate in New York. In exchange, the United States will reopen its consulate in Kiev.

"When (former President) Jimmy Carter closed the New York consulate, some of the personnel were moved to the U.N. mission," Simes said. "Now some will move back."

A State Department official said that a secret National Security Decision Document approved by Reagan early this year called for reductions in the Soviet delegations, which total 275 people, more than double the Chinese representation, which is the second largest at the United Nations. Friday's order calls on Moscow to reduce the personnel to 170 during the next two years, a 38% cut.

The official said that pressure from Congress underlined the Administration's concern about espionage, especially aimed at obtaining information about high technology.

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